

"They teamed up with the police and the Klan:" Jack O'Dell on red baiting in the National Maritime Union



Brief account by Jack O'Dell of the CIO's 'Operation Dixie', a strategy to organize the American South, failing due to anti-communist purges and raids in the union federation.

When the CIO initiated Operation Dixie in 1946 to challenge racial discrimination and organize workers in the largely unorganized South, Jack O'Dell signed up as a volunteer organizer. He was met with a steep resistance to racial integration and a groundswell of Cold War anti-communism that crippled and then killed the CIO's will to radically alter the working conditions of the South. Nationwide, the CIO expelled unions it claimed were influenced by communists – amounting to nearly a million workers. Jack O'Dell was one victim of the anti-communist purge. He lost his membership in the National Maritime Union in 1959, one day after the start of the Korean War.

O'DELL: I came into the civil rights movement through the industrial trade Union movement. I volunteered to be a volunteer organizer for Operation Dixie, which is what the CIO was into at that particular point and I helped to organize the hotel and restaurant workers over on the beach and so forth. It was the industrial Unions that were organizing of which NMU was a part. And we knew what a strike was. We knew what a job action was. We knew how to confront ship owners. We knew how to tie up a dock. So that was the movement. The movement was the new, young Congress of Industrial Organizations that organized packing houses, and steel and auto and maritime. And I volunteered. The whole principle of Operation Dixie was you're going to organize the unorganized. I was only there for about a year and a half. But I would say this, that it just ground to a halt. In other words, it was, like, being died a boring. The commitment to Operation Dixie was one of the things that was sacrificed because focus now was on raiding Unions. It wasn't on organizing the unorganized. They focused now on expelling Unions and raiding them. That's where the energy was going. You follow me? It was that simple. Instead of the energy going to



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organizing the unorganized and building the trade Union movement, the energy went into expelling Unions that didn't go along with the Marshall Plan and the ... and the official policy.

The Union was split as was the CIO. And as you know, a number of Union were expelled from the CIO, amounting to about a million and a half workers out of the five million that had been organized. Organizing stopped. Unions started raiding one another. And the issue was whether or not you supported the Marshall Plan. You see it at the NMU convention in 1947 where the attempt to expel Joe Stack succeeded by one vote. Joe Stack was the leader of the left. I don't know whether he was a Communist or not but he was a militant leader who was supported by Communists. Everything was trotted out to characterize these people as actually working for the Soviet Union and not working for the seamen in the Union. And we knew these guys. I mean, these guys had a history of Union building. So the big question also for the Union was if you don't shape up we're not going to be in the CIO. So therefore, the right would appeal to unity. We could maintain the industrial base. The conservative elements were given a cause: save the Union from the Communists.

I supported preserving the Union. I supported keeping the NMU a strong, militant Union that's going to fight for wages and conditions an against racism in

the larger community.

NMU in those southern ports played a role in beginning to break down segregation in Houston and New Orleans, and so forth. I supported that. They would have a Union meeting and Flannery, the Port Agent, would bring guys up on charges of bringing the Union into ill repute. And these guys were just on a roll, and they would snatch somebody's book based on that. John Smith brought the Union into ill repute ad he's part of the Communist hacks, and so forth.

I decided my best bet was to grab a ship and get the hell out of there because I knew if they won the election, this was just pie in the sky compared to what they were going to do. So I got a ship that went to Yokohama. I got back to New Orleans almost about ten months later.

And all the guys I knew were out of the Union. They were still outside passing out leaflets and trying to explain what was going on in the Union, but they were out of the Union. I walked in there and threw in my Union card and Flannery looked at me as if to say how ...

how'd we miss you? (laughs) But it was too late. The roll was over. The rank and file movement leadership had been stripped of the right to ship. Well, if you can't sail, you can't follow the membership and they would even use that against you in the sense that can you sail? Well, I can't talk to you

Now, in the south what I was describing was a situation where we were outnumbered because the anti-Communist thing became a banner — a tent under which all these racist elements could assemble and cover their flanks. They teamed up with the police and the Klan, the Union officials, to run blacks out of the Union hall. It was almost like a Reconstruction thing you read about — how they overthrew the government, the blacks are forced to flee, and so forth. It was that kind of atmosphere they were able to create. I was expelled from NMU the day after the Korean War broke out — my Union book taken, June the 26th, 1950 and the Korean War broke out June the 25th. And so, from that point on within NMU is we're in a cold war. Can you trust these guys to sail with you? These guys are pro-Soviet. Well, I sailed during World War II, and others like me, but now suddenly you wouldn't be trusted on the ship because you didn't support U.S. policy. And of course, the Communist thing was a brush that they would put on you. They didn't have to prove you were a communist. And how are you going to prove you weren't? But the basic assumption was that you were

either a Communist dupe or a Communist front or you were a follower of the communists. You had to find jobs ashore. Well, fortunately, Marine Cooks And Stewards, which was a west Coast

Union, had a unit in New Orleans and so we could get port time and you could make a little light living on that. But you couldn't sail out, but you'd do port time. I did quite a bit of that.

Source: Interviewed by Sam Sills 8/5/93

Courtesy Sam Sills

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